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Résumé de l'article

A review of documentary performance in Canadian theatre over a forty-year span explores how it has continued as a gateway practice that simultaneously enables and refuses theatre disciplinarity, the system of value that differentiates the professional from the amateur, and which produces concepts of excellence and mastery. In the decades since a generation of actor-creators reinvented the theatre profession in Canada by creating texts out of research (following the template of Theatre Passe Muraille's *The Farm Show* in 1972), documentary has become institutionalized as a theatrical strategy in which high-affect performance serves as an authenticating convention, giving shows the gloss of disciplinarity that invites credibility in the authority of the text. The sophisticated documentaries of Annabel Soutar suggest that this high-disciplinary mode authorizes work as professionalized culture and exerts influence on the wider theatre community. That documentary continues to function as a means of professional entry and cultural inclusion can be seen in Judith Thompson's recent work with socially excluded communities, who in their work with the playwright claim theatrical presence by documenting their own experience. Against the highly disciplined work of Soutar and Thompson, the persistence of a low-disciplinary mode that refuses the aesthetic values of professionalized culture shows that reduced theatricality -- the representation of a lack of representation -- retains tactical power because it can create an image of a rigorous and de-aestheticized fidelity to evidence. Gary Kirkham and Dwight Storring's verbatim documentary, *Rage Against Violence*, shows how this low-disciplinary mode is an effective and accessible cultural resource for community activists.

"Supercharged Reality": Documentary and Theatrical Disciplinarity

Alan Filewod

> I have a very dangerous story to tell you. This story is so dangerous that I cannot even tell it. It's so dangerous I can't tell it to you. So I will tell you another story. This story is not so dangerous but it starts out the same way.
>
> — The Mummers Troupe, *Buchans: A Mining Town* (73)

When *Studies in Canadian Literature* began publication, I had just spent a year in Newfoundland with a makeshift and aspirationally radical theatre troupe, creating plays by and with striking miners in a company town and working-class residents in the East End of St John's. Our shows were devised in rehearsal without scripts or scenarios, built on research and ideas brought in by the actors. We had no aesthetic model in mind; every decision was a discovery, and we didn't really ask whether we were creating good theatre art. We were going with what worked in a highly compressed creative process, in which a play could be conceived, researched, devised, and performed in six weeks. We made less than minimum wage, and when there was no money in the budget, we went on the pogey, like so many others in Newfoundland. When I left the Mummers Troupe in 1975 to resume my studies at York University, the group continued making interventionist community theatre for another six years before falling apart, ruptured with dissent, anger, and, inevitably because of the pressures of poverty, exhaustion.

When I returned to university, I was bemused to hear a professor announce, with the gravity that eminence brings, that there was no political theatre in Canada. My feeling of offence was somewhat mitigated by the realization that the work we had been doing was invisible to institutional eyes because it was very local, noticed only by the audiences it was created for, and ephemeral. Nor did it generate publishable dramatic scripts, which are the archive of theatre creation. Ours was a practice-based, as opposed to a text-based, theatre. We took our

theatrical material from real life, from tape-recorded interviews and witnessed moments. We understood that what we were doing by staging stories drawn from field research was a form of documentary theatre — the word was in the air but without specific definition — and we approached it as a process of community intervention.

The widespread turn to documentary theatre practice in the early 1970s had many sources, but its chief attraction was that it enabled barely trained actor-creators to create plays in a very short time with minimal budgets. Across Canada, pop-up theatre troupes, often assembled casually with small project grants, discovered the particular energy and satisfaction of playing back to communities that informed the creative process. Looking back at that moment after four decades, from a theatre culture that has undergone immense transformation to become the boisterous, plural, increasingly diverse industry that it is today, we can discern how documentary performance operated in a liminal zone where radical refusal encountered the pressures of disciplinarity and professionalization. By radical refusal here I am referring to the oppositional stance of politically engaged theatre that refuses the aesthetic conventions and values of professionalized culture. Tracing the shifting application of documentary in Canadian theatre over the forty-year span that sparks this reflection, we can see how it has continued as a gateway practice that simultaneously enables and refuses theatre disciplinarity, the system of value that historically differentiates the professional from the amateur, and which produces concepts of excellence and mastery.

What I experienced in the Mummers was one local moment of a cultural revolution that was transforming the arts as a field of institutional possibility in Canada in the early 1970s. By the time *Studies in Canadian Literature* was founded, that revolution had reached a peak: an emergent cultural industry in the literary and performing arts was entering a period of consolidation after a decade of heated growth. The survivors of that consolidation established the architecture of the cultural infrastructure we see today. This was especially the case in the theatre, which experienced a remarkable generational flowering in the early 1970s. Most of the youthful theatre troupes that popped up — and there were hundreds of them across the country — did not survive the cultural hunger games that ensued.

At play in that time was a hardly recognized struggle of institutionalization and disciplinarity as young artists discovered that theatre work is

easy to start but hard to sustain. To survive, troupes had to find a niche and master it; they had to attract and maintain increasingly discerning but always value-seeking audiences who would remain loyal as costs increased; they had to attain critical distinction (not because critics could make or break a show, but because they had the ear of the arts councils). In short, they had to professionalize; they had to demonstrate professional disciplinarity and creative imagination. That entailed the founding of a producing body with a continuing structure of governance and a sustainable financial model. For theatre troupes this meant becoming a company eligible for some measure of funding support; this required a board of directors, not-for-profit incorporation, season planning and audience development, and fair employment practices (which entailed "going Equity": signing the Canadian Theatre Agreement with Canadian Actors' Equity Association). The companies that survived were those that produced new work, took on the hard work of play development, and engaged with the increasingly apparent diversity of Canadian society. Without institutionalization, theatre workers could not afford their careers; without disciplinarity, they could not sell their labour.

Throughout the '70s the arts councils strove to impose balance and uniform professional standards on a chaotic theatre culture, often at the cost of radical innovation. There was intense competition for meager resources, as arts councils sought to balance contradictory commitments: sustaining large flagship operations, expanding cultural access, recognizing new art practices and constituencies, and sifting through an ever-increasing number of aspirant companies. This was the heyday of what became known as the "alternative theatre movement," and hundreds, and in time thousands, of new plays sprawled across stages — often found in church basements, union halls, and old industrial buildings. In that bootstrap cultural moment, a generation of theatre artists (which is now moving into retirement) taught themselves the techniques of improvisatory theatre creation, and many of them went on to become playwrights whose work travelled from theatre to theatre, functioning as the connective ligaments of a very dispersed theatre culture. Reflecting on this period several years later, a panel of former Canada Council Theatre Officers noted that the number of theatres applying for the limited pool of operating funds increased from "twenty-five to thirty" in 1971 to 102 in 1975 (Kilbourn et al. 10). To put that figure in con-

text, in 1976 the Council supported 86 theatre organizations (Canada Council, *Annual Report*); in 2015, it supported 197 companies with multi-year operating grants, and disbursed over 1,000 operating grants in total (Canada Council, "Searchable Grants"). These comprise only a fraction of the actual number of producing troupes and unincorporated project-based companies. There is a parallel to be found in music: we can count the number of professional symphony orchestras, but it is impossible to count the number of indy garage bands.

The marketable and reproducible playtext is still the main commodity of the theatre industry, but of the thousands of new plays produced every year (many of them in summer fringe festivals), only a small handful ever appears in print. It is in the vast number of plays that never see remounts or publications that we find the continuities of theatre practice, particularly in what is now called devised theatre, but in 1976 was known as collective creation. And in this category, documentary remains an active and adaptive cultural strategy that enables transition between the two poles of theatre disciplinarity: "community" and "profession."

The Practice of Theatrical Populism

Why was this new hybrid practice, which combined collective creation and documentary, so popular in the early 1970s, when it seemed that every small town was overrun by enthusiastic would-be proletarian actors with tape recorders? The template was Paul Thompson and Theatre Passe Muraille's 1972 *The Farm Show*, which established the basic model of actors interviewing residents of a rural community and improvising a show about them, strung together with monologues, songs, and comic sketches. After its initial run in an auction barn in Clinton, Ontario, to an audience sitting on hay bales, *The Farm Show* became legendary in Canadian theatre; it was the subject of a 1973 documentary film by Michael Ondaatje and most of the cast went on to very successful careers in the theatre. The model of the show became very influential; there was, as the show's director Paul Thompson observed, a kind of Maoist-inspired desire to learn from the people, but beneath that was a social anxiety about cultural authenticity that had been given fuel by the soft nationalism of the Trudeau era (Filewod, *Collective* 35). As a political stance it was extraordinarily blind to postcolonial realities. *The Farm Show* was a celebration of rural culture

and an elegy for what seemed to be the passing of a way of life. But the culture and life captured by the show was uniformly white and heterosexual, and the final line of the play, "How else do you build a nation?," was delivered with no sense of the ironies that we might read into it today (102). Similarly, Twenty-Fifth Street House's 1978 *Paper Wheat*, a nostalgic homage to the generation of largely Eastern European immigrants who busted the sod of the prairies, and who did so successfully enough that their grandchildren could live in a world that offered theatre as an occupational choice, introduces the land as empty and unpopulated. It is astonishing now to read the play and note the total lack of even cursory acknowledgement of indigeneity.

This theatrical populism was both the final breath of the twentieth-century liberal dream of a nation that comes into presence through cultural production, and the beginning of a new understanding in which nation is praxis. The hegemonic, nostalgic, and culturally blind vision of the settler nation was beginning to open up to the disruptive and messy realities that came into focus when the exclusionary texts of Canadian nationalism were challenged. Looking at that historical moment, it becomes apparent why Homi Bhabha's argument about pedagogical and performative nationhoods struck such a resonant chord in Canadian universities to the generation of academics who had been captivated by the populism of the 1970s.

The theatricality of the documentary theatre movement in that moment was brash, protean, and physical, and the preferred style was presentational storytelling rather than dramatic containment. Behind it was the popular movement of physical improvisation that had been popularized in the 1960s by American teachers such as Viola Spoilin, who had an immense impact on secondary school theatre art curricula, and the avant-garde improvisation of the Living Theatre and Joe Chaiken's Open Theatre. It was, in a word, youthful, and many of the self-scripting actors had no previous training. They tended to high-affect theatricality, meant to dazzle and move; it meant too that there was a common tendency towards a shameless sentimentalism.

The Farm Show process was a transferable model for the community documentary because it was cheap to produce and easy to improvise. Typically, actors would scour the subject community for interviews to create monologues, and improvise theatrical sequences that frequently used music as a structural bridge. Rehearsals worked as show-and-tell

sessions that brainstormed scene ideas, and as the opening neared, sequences were strung together in a "clothesline." In the final weeks, as Chris Brookes describes, "chaff is sorted out, the more important material is developed further, and over two thirds of the show-and-tell material is usually trashed" (122). The haphazard structure of the documentary show as it came together in rehearsals led to the emergence of the dramaturge, who functioned as an editor and assembler of the final script (if there was, in fact, a script). There are some excellent descriptions of this process still available; Rick Salutin's preface to *1837: The Farmer's Revolt* describes the creative process from the viewpoint of "the writer on — but not of" the play (113), and Chris Brookes's "Gros Mourn — A Diary" documents how a show could be put together in a couple of weeks in response to an unexpected political opportunity for community intervention (78-96).

It was not long before this documentary method had become so familiar that it was in danger of being conventionalized. In 1975, when the Mummers took *Company Town* to Toronto, Urjo Kareda, reviewing in the *Toronto Star*, wrote that it "seems built to a documentary formula and the exercise now seems tired and stiff" (qtd. in Filewod, *Collective* 112); four years later, after the surge of collective documentaries had crested, Paul Thompson announced that "documentary is a dead end" (qtd. in Filewod, *Collective* 26). But as a theatrical method, it retained the capacity to adapt quickly to opportunities. One such opportunity came to Thompson in 1975, when he gathered a cast of young actors to create a documentary about sex in Toronto, inspired by CITY TV's introduction of soft-core porn on late night programming. This was a critical turning point for Theatre Passe Muraille (TPM), which marked its shift to institutionalization because it enabled the company to acquire a permanent theatre facility.

I Love You, Baby Blue was an unexpected hit that introduced TPM to a new urban audience demographic and sundered the documentary process from a definable informant community. It earned enough revenue over its unprecedented four-month run for the company to acquire the Ryerson Street building it still occupies. It was the hottest show in town; as one of the performers said, "Lots of people came for tits and ass. It was truly the best show in town for that" (qtd. in Filewod, *Collective* 34). It was also the most explicit, with a cast of young and sexy performers cheerfully disrobing as they narrated, simulated, and

critiqued Toronto's public obsession with sex. Conforming to the template of *The Farm Show*, it was an anthology of sketches and monologues, some verbatim and some invented, and it included one scene in particular that combined theatrical boldness with one of the most sexually explicit moments ever seen on a Toronto theatre stage:

> ACTRESS: *To audience* Ladies and Gentlemen, right here on this very stage *She covers a hole in the back drop with her hat* the most amazing phenomenon will take place, the magnificent, the stupendous . . . Human Levitation! *Removes hat and we see a penis hanging out the hole* Watch it rise, watch it rise. Higher and Higher, no strings attached. *She demonstrates the fact* Ladies and gentlemen, we must all combine our energies here and focus, we must all think hard . . . harder . . . . Ladies! Gentlemen! *By now the penis has either risen or not risen. If it did, she said . . . "The Human Levitation" and hung her hat on it; if it didn't she said, "The Human Levitation has a headache!" and she'd cover it again with top hat and BLACKOUT.* (Theatre Passe Muraille 56)

In its final week of performance, an anonymous complaint resulted in a police charge of obscenity, which the Crown withdrew at trial. This had the effect of enhancing the show's notoriety. The unexpected and overwhelming success of *I Love You, Baby Blue* marked a transition phase in TPM's documentary theatre work and in the direction of documentary theatre in general in Canada by demonstrating that documentary could function as a hot trigger in the public sphere — and make money.

In that same season, in Toronto, audiences could catch the second and third parts of James Reaney's newly completed *The Donnellys* trilogy (*Sticks and Stones*, *The St. Nicholas Hotel*, *Handcuffs*), plays that, while not documentary, presented and played with documentary evidence and were grounded in the material culture and textual archive of actuality. At Toronto Workshop Productions, the premiere of Jack Winter's *You Can't Get Here from There*, a documentary about Canadian government indifference to refugees from the Pinochet regime, had to be postponed when unidentified arsonists torched the theatre on the eve of the opening. Outside of Toronto, we can trace the influence of Paul Thompson, who was extending his reach into Alberta, seeding new companies in Alberta and Saskatchewan. This was the season of TPM's *The West Show* and Twenty-Fifth Street Theatre's *If You're So Good, Why*

Are You in Saskatoon?, which introduced the young Linda Griffiths to documentary performance and set her on the road to *Maggie and Pierre* (1980) and subsequent distinction as a playwright. And in that same year, the Mummers Troupe made a major breakthrough by taking its *Buchans: A Mining Town* (renamed *Company Town*) on the road with support by miners' union locals, and intervening in labour history with Rick Salutin's *IWA: The Loggers' Strike of 1959*. Chris Brookes, who founded and directed the Mummers, acknowledged his debt to Paul Thompson and TPM for the template of *The Farm Show*, but at the same time marked an important divergence by contrasting TPM's community process with his own collaborative politics and belief in "useful theatre," which led him to develop shows with unions and community partners in the social justice movement. In the long run, that would have a powerful influence over what was known in the 1980s as the popular theatre movement, a coalition of theatres and artists who created performances in alliance with social justice partners.

The bootstrap imperative for documentary subsided in the 1980s and '90s, as the generation that created *The Farm Show* grew in age and artistry, and in time moved into the containment field of professional theatre. They had been a significant factor in the emergence of a cultural infrastructure dedicated to producing new plays, and a cadre of dramaturgically experienced actor-creators were instrumental in the emergent play development workshops that arose to meet the increasing demand for new plays. Still, the documentary impulse continued as an effective process of claiming cultural space and activating communities, and the template of the collective documentary "show" was a key part of the dramaturgical repertoire for the socially engaged theatres that comprised the popular theatre movement in the 1980s and '90s.

Few of those plays saw publication, but a major exception was the 1983 collectively-created *This Is For You, Anna: A Spectacle of Revenge*, a feminist restructuring of the idea of the documentary play, in which reportage and evidence are replaced by testimony and the authority of the responding and witnessing body in performance (The Anna Project). In *This Is For You, Anna*, the actor-writers — including Ann-Marie MacDonald, who began writing *Good Night Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* while touring this show — staged their own individual and collective reactions to news accounts of a German woman who had shot her daughter's killer in a court room. Writing on *The Farm Show* in

1982, Robert Nunn made the point that the show was itself the event it documented, that the play was about the process of researching the play. Ten years later, feminist theatre activists took that one step further: they were at once the subject of the documentary, the evidence it presented, and the proof of that evidence. In the performance moment they were the actuality they represented.

Documentary Binaries

The first phase of documentary work was a generational project to reinvent the theatre profession in Canada, and in that sense, the documentary process was a cultural strategy that sought its own redundancy. It was a way of getting past itself, and it was a laboratory that taught actors how to write plays. This is the idea that Michael Healey toys with in *The Drawer Boy*, his 1999 Governor General's Award-winning comedy about a young actor's interactions with two farmers he interviews for a play that is identified by internal references as *The Farm Show*. The actor's clumsy intervention inadvertently triggers a healing crisis for one of the farmers, who has suffered memory loss for years. The play sentimentalizes *The Farm Show* as a moment of origin in which naiveté matures into artistry, when an actor discovers disciplinarity despite himself. As the actor replays a moment between the two farmers, reenacting their daily life without permission, the transfer of identity brings about a psychodramatic crisis. Healey's point would seem to be that the naiveté of the actor is the precondition of the cure: the actor acknowledges ethical boundaries but exploits them: he takes the story and uses it for his purposes. But in violating the ethical contract he functions as the psychodramatic auxiliary ego that brings about the cure through the crisis of reenactment — and becomes part of the story.

The Drawer Boy is a clever fable about art, and a rather fond but dismissive satire about the pretensions of young radical artists. It offers a reflective history of a signal moment, endorsed by the collaboration of veterans of that moment. It is *The Farm Show* as remembered by its alumni, looking back at their radical youth from the pinnacle of careers spent in the theatre profession that their younger selves had refused. It is a remembrance in which *The Farm Show* is purged of its radical project, and invested instead as a precondition for plays such as *The Drawer Boy*. The play's success proves its own premise by arguing a narrative of

cultural maturation: *The Farm Show* metonymically created the conditions that conferred the Governor General's Award for Drama on its "mature" descendent.

In Canadian theatre history, the documentary can be seen in this way as an historical phase, but as a theatrical method it remains in the repertoire of methods and continues to function as a mechanism that both enables and refuses disciplinary legitimacy. There are two binaries at play in contemporary documentary work: the first is the tactical binary of high and low disciplinarity (a binary that is often described as "professional" and "amateur" but in reality is more about political tactics than cultural economics). The other is modal, as defined by the British scholar Derek Paget who identifies two divergent modes of documentary work: the "recording" documentary that "believes that the effacement of the subjective creator(s) of cultural production will produce an objective account" (39), and a "radical/revolutionary reporting" (40) mode that exposes context and builds critical argument through montage. Paget sees a cultural genealogy in this latter mode that can be traced from Erwin Piscator's first experiments in documentary in the 1920s in Berlin, through to Joan Littlewood's work with Theatre Workshop (most famously, *Oh, What A Lovely War*), and Peter Cheeseman's interventionist community documentaries in Stoke-On-Trent. It was also the mode of the Living Newspapers of Federal Theatre Project in the United States, and it is the mode in which the Canadian tradition can be situated. Both Littlewood and Cheeseman had direct influence here; Littlewood through George Luscombe, who spent five years in her company, and Cheeseman through Ken Kramer and Sue Kramer, who apprenticed with him before founding the Globe Theatre in Regina, where they introduced their own documentaries in collaboration with Rex Deverell.

In this "radical/revolutionary" mode (which is often neither), documentary evidence is subject to playful commentary and elaboration as the performers present and cast judgment on the material. It is in this sense the descendent of the agitprop of the Workers' Theatre Movement of the 1930s. This was the predominant mode of the Canadian documentary in the 1970s, with its exuberant and acrobatic theatricality: actors leaping onto imagined freight trains in Jack Winter's *Ten Lost Years*, or turning into chickens in *The Farm Show*, or variously breaking into song, playing with puppets, story-telling or improvising comic

turns. In the Canadian tradition, the original audience of the documentary was often the subject constituency who saw its own words played back to them; as one farmer-informant comments in *The Clinton Special*, Michael Ondaatje's film of *The Farm Show*'s 1973 revival, the actor playing him "mimicked me pretty good." Reviewing the film many years after the fact on the website Vivelecanada, the pseudonymous critic "Flic" observed that

> the actors, in their social-democratic inclusivity, seem to have become obliged to make the farmers happy, and seem desperate throughout to have the farmers "like" the show. The actors discuss the play they create as if it is documentary, and, in many ways, it is: they hung out, worked on the farm, asked a lot of questions, and went so far as to imitate mannerisms and accents quite slavishly. On the other hand, they were constrained by their unspoken promise to the farmers: this is a play not just about you, but for you.

In the Mummers Troupe's *Company Town*, one of the informants, a retired miner, followed the show on its tour and would stand in the audience and bow after the actor playing him finished the scene (Brookes 126). This performance relationship with the source community tended to generate a lively, often over-heated theatricality — the "show" — that expressed solidarity rather than analysis.

In contrast, the "recording" documentary is forensic — a call to the forum — and inherently polemical. Its principle device is what Paget termed "verbatim" reproductions of actuality. Its "supercharged reality" is exemplified by Peter Weiss's *The Investigation*, if not the first, at least the first famous verbatim play, in which austerely edited and arranged transcripts of the 1964 Frankfurt trials of Auschwitz guards were compressed into an versified oratorio form, divided into cantos (Paget 42). *The Investigation* shook the theatre world; it opened on the same night at the Royal Shakespeare Company in London and in fourteen theatres in Germany, both East and West (including a flagship Berlin production at the Freie Volksbühne directed by Piscator). Verbatim transcript plays have become common since then: British theatre saw a major efflorescence in the 1990s with David Hare's "tribunal" plays at the Tricycle Theatre, which staged transcripts of government hearings. In Canada, the verbatim tradition began with John Coulter's *The Trial of Louis Riel* in 1968 and The Mummers Troupe's 1976 verbatim and unadorned

adaptation of *Dying Hard*, Elliot Leyton's oral history of miners dying of silicosis from the fluorspar mines of the Burin Peninsula.

Reduced theatricality, the elimination of adornment and the dampening of affect, is a common strategy in the verbatim play. The Passe Muraille tradition persuades through sentiment, rough artistry, enthusiasm, and theatrical heat; the verbatim tradition persuades through the power of evidence. Following *The Investigation*, Weiss published his major statement on the form "Fourteen Propositions for a Documentary Theatre," in which he addressed its capacity for a dispassionate analysis. Briefly summarized, he proposes that the documentary play is a theatre of factual reports that "shuns all invention" and clarifies information by criticizing media distortion (139); it cannot address hidden documents and it "demands clarification" of the "present state of affairs" (140). It is not agitprop and must justify itself as art; it is not political action, but is "the instrument of the formation of political thought" that builds an analytical "model" of events from fragments of reality and submits facts for appraisal (141); thus it takes sides and "functions as a tribunal that places the spectator in the heart of the proceedings" (142). It is complicit in audience space and therefore must go into factories, schools, and public halls, and it must be produced by "a stable working group, possessing a political and sociological formation, and capable of undertaking a scientific inquiry based on abundant archives" (143).

For Weiss, the documentary is ideological advocacy and the theatre is its public forum. The function of reduced theatricality is to transmit information with the least possible distortion, although he recognizes the need for montage, songs, mime, and gestural acting (142). In this he was influenced by the rigorously spare theatricality of Brecht's polemical *lehrstücke* such as *The Measures Taken* and *He Who Says Yes*/*He Who Says No.* But it is important to recognize that this muting can still generate powerful emotional affect. The two most famous (because controversial) verbatim plays of recent years both make their case through the power of sentimental affect: *The Laramie Project* by Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project about the homophobic murder of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming in 1998, and *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, compiled by Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner from the letters and emails of the young American activist who was killed by an Israeli army bulldozer while acting as a human shield in Palestine.

The wide international circulation of both attests to the emotional power of verbatim documentary, particularly when it takes a partisan position on a controversial topic in the public sphere. *My Name is Rachel Corrie* was dropped from the season of the New York Theater Workshop in 2006 because members of the theatre's board considered its pro-Palestinian politics anti-Semitic. Later that same year, the Canadian Stage Company in Toronto withdrew a planned production of the play from its season. In November 2006, the CBC had reported that CanStage was "negotiating for the rights" of the play ("Toronto's CanStage"); a month later, artistic director Martin Bragg announced its cancellation. In his words, "It was an artistic decision. It just didn't work on stage" ("Toronto Theatre"). But according to *Toronto Star* drama critic Richard Ouzounian, Bragg cancelled the show "after frenzied behind-the-scenes lobbying" by members of his board who took exception to the play's political stance.

The tendency of verbatim is towards detheatricalization so that the documentary material — whether it be letters and emails, as in *Rachel Corrie*, or interviews as in *The Laramie Project* and *Dying Hard* — is presented as bare truth, unmediated by theatrics which may be perceived as misleading or inauthentic — despite the paradox that an actor alone on stage speaking an edited transcript is no more authentic than an ensemble jumping around the stage pretending to be farmers. In her work on contemporary documentary theatre, Carol Martin calls our attention to the problematic ambivalence of this paradox. She questions the representational strategies of documentary efforts, and identifies six "functions" of the form: "to reopen trials," "to create additional historical accounts," "to reconstruct an event," "to intermingle autobiography with history," "to critique the operations of documentary and fiction," and "to elaborate the oral culture of theatre" (12). She cautions that "the paradox of a theatre of facts that uses representation to enact a relationship with the real should not be lost in the enthusiasm for a politically viable theatre" (13).

That paradox — that compressed factuality masks invention — may be resolved in part by a verbatim method that embraces high-affect theatricality and acknowledges invention. In the hands of playwrights who edit and transform verbatim prose into dramatic language, verbatim undergoes a process of retheatricalization, which in some cases has resulted in publication and canonization as dramatic literature. In

these retheatricalizations, high-affect performance serves as an authenticating convention, giving the shows the gloss of disciplinarity that invites credibility in the authority of the text. That credibility in authority is beneficial in plays that intervene in topical issues and seek to investigate and persuade. A powerful recent example is Annabel Soutar's *Seeds*, an investigative documentary into the politics of corporate agriculture and patented genetically modified crops. Soutar is the founder and artistic director of Porte Parole, an innovative, game-changing Montreal theatre dedicated to highly professionalized documentary performance. Founded in 2000, Porte Parole's plays all engage with pressing issues in the civil commons, including the 2000 dot.com bubble (*2000 Questions*, 2002), Algerian immigrant experience in Montreal (*Montréal la blanche*, 2004), Canadian-Chinese trade relations (*Import/Export*, 2008), the Laval overpass collapse (*Sexy béton*, 2009), and, more recently, *The Watershed* (2015), about water resources and the environment (Porte Parole).

In *Seeds*, Soutar undertook a comprehensive investigation into the story of the 2004 Supreme Court case that upheld a claim by the multinational agri-giant Monsanto against Saskatchewan farmer Percy Schmeiser for patent infringement after unauthorised canola plants appeared on his farm. The play follows in the mode of the U.S. Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers of the late 1930s, in which theatre artists and journalists collaborated to create investigative theatrical reports, foregrounding the authenticating conventions of the newspaper profession. Like the Living Newspaper Unit, Porte Parole reinforces its truth claim by developing a chain of documentable evidence and performing it as a research report. *Seeds* is more personalized than the Living Newspapers; instead of the omniscient loudspeaker "Voice of the Living Newspaper" that narrated plays such as *Triple-A Plowed Under* (1936, about the New Deal Agricultural Adjustment Act), *Seeds* stages the character of The Playwright, who recreates the research process and, like the Living Newspaper's Voice, adds editorial comment. And, as Jenn Stephenson, observes, she interpellates the audience into her process:

> This strategy opens up an additional perspective in terms of the play's reality as we not only hear the verbatim text but we are witness to Annabel's interviews, to her encounters with her subjects.

> We hear her questions as well as the answers she receives. The real-world process of making verbatim theatre is interwoven with the results of that process. Another result of this strategy is that we are also witness to Annabel's uncertainty — and her doubts become ours, keeping conclusions at bay.

Stephenson argues that this interpellation produces uncertainty but, like the Living Newspapers, *Seeds* establishes authority by drawing attention to the disciplinary process of research. The high disciplinary theatricality is part of this. Although Soutar draws attention to herself as The Playwright, she locates herself in a larger team that fulfills Peter Weiss's call for "a stable working group . . . capable of undertaking a scientific inquiry" (143). This is built into the theatrical design of the play, in which a cast of seven actors play 40 roles; all of the actors remain on stage throughout, witnessing when not playing. In a play about evidence, scientific and legal, the ensemble performs the stability of a research group, and as Soutar explains in the introduction of the published text, the director and designer "conceived of the *Seeds* stage environment as a laboratory, and of the actors as scientists and lab technicians. Reference is therefore made to the actors in this version as "lab technicians" when they are helping the playwright narrate her story" (xi). The presence of the actors as a verifying research team resonates in the final moments of the play:

> PLAYWRIGHT: This phenomenon . . . yes, this *phenomenal* aspect of life, we won't see it. Because it's not that reality, or *biology*, or *life* has changed since Watson and Crick — it is our *perception* that is changing. It is *we* who must ask ourselves not just, "What is life?" but "How do we want to see life modified?"
> I think our future depends on it. But then I am just one person. *The PLAYWRIGHT looks at the other actors on stage.*
> Not really.
> Thank you for listening. (127-28)

The disciplinarity of theatre work — trained actors, designed set and lights, multi-media projections — all serve to reinforce the credibility of the play as a surrogate of the disciplinarity of research. The audience trusts the play because the affective experience of the performance is a form of persuasion; its ultra-professionalism contains us in a methodology.

In and Out of Disciplinarity

That documentary can still be an effective strategy of achieving disciplinary status can be seen in the recent career of Judith Thompson, who, by virtue of her many awards and the volume of critical scholarship on her work, may be considered Canada's most eminent playwright. From that position — the valorizing pinnacle of disciplinarity — she has reworked the ethics of the audience's affective contract in a series of documentary performances that enable the audience to see communities that are often effaced. This has led to a series of plays that she describes as "the most enlightening, humbling, and gratifying theatre experience of my life" ("RARE" 1). As Thompson describes it, her venture into documentary began in 2008, when a representative of Olgivy and Mather, a Toronto advertising firm, on behalf of the cosmetics multinational Dove, approached her with a proposal:

> She asked me if I would be interested in creating a play about beauty and aging with real women between the ages of forty-five and eighty. I jumped at it, with the condition that no Dove products would be mentioned, let alone be featured on stage. They agreed and were respectfully hands-off during the whole process. ("RARE" 4)

The show that came out of the process was *Body and Soul*, in which the cast of fourteen women shared their stories in a theatrical sequence braided by the playwright.

> I wanted to get to the mucky, difficult stuff of life. And so asked for two two-week workshops. And thus my alternate playwriting path began. And it was like creating a path out of the woods. Listening to story after story, response after response, and cutting and clearing and choosing and finally creating a beautiful path, all from their amazing courage, their exquisite words. ("RARE" 4)

Thompson's playwriting has always tended towards creating a tangible sense of actuality, favouring dramatic episodes over plot and capturing the rhythms and idioms of overheard life. She has always demonstrated more interest in exposure, healing, and redemption than in narrative closure. Although she claims that her only experience with documentary had been "listening to war stories about *The Farm Show*," with *Body*

and Soul she developed a rehearsal method that involved the actors as storytellers:

> My method in devising these plays is to ask simple questions. "What do you wish?" Or "I feel like a bit of dusty pavement today, what do you feel like?" Or "let's talk about falling in love." Or "what is your mother like?" "Has anyone died in your family?" And on and on, while the script supervisor madly typed in every word the performers utter. And then I would refine and sculpt and cajole until those perfect poetic answers emerged — the ones I was looking for but could not, in good conscience, impose. ("RARE" 3)

In effect, Thompson developed a process of remediated verbatim in which she curates the words of her actors, transforming them into theatrical representations of themselves. She has continued with a series of works with effaced or vulnerable communities: in *The Grace Project: Sick!* (2008) she worked with youth who were coping with disability or chronic illness; in *Rare* (2012) she worked with actors with Down Syndrome, and more recently with wheelchair-mobile actors in *Borne* (2014). All three have been performed in professional theatre venues; they are interventions in the fundamental structure of the professionalized theatre economy in which Thompson deploys both her craft and celebrity to bring marginalized, minoritized, and outcast communities into our understanding of what peak disciplinary theatre can be. At the same time, there is a doubled liberation at work: as the playwright uses her labour to enable communities into articulation, she emancipates herself from the bindings of the professional theatre economy, moving "away from the playwright-as-beggar position we usually find ourselves in" ("RARE" 7). Thompson acknowledges that she has this agency because of her privilege as a tenured professor in a university that supports her creative work as research.

Despite their success (and indeed because of it), Thompson's plays have not been universally welcomed and leave her open to critique, particularly as she moves from a peer relationship with the mainly professional class women with whom she created *Body and Soul* to what might be called a maternalist relationship to the casts of the subsequent plays. Her move to a documentary process is a familiar cultural tactic of inclusion, in which excluded communities claim theatrical presence by documenting their own experience. In that sense, *Rare* follows in

the tradition of *The Farm Show*. One of the major projects of the documentaries of the 1970s was the legitimization of local voices, accents, and dialects in a theatre culture where the mid-Atlantic Shakespearean voice was still dominant; in a similar way, *Rare*'s project is to open the theatre community for Down Syndrome people. Thompson's move to found her own theatre company to continue this work is an intervention in disciplinarity that seeks to transform the theatre profession and to expand its understanding of disciplinarity.

The issue of disciplinarity divides documentary work into two streams that intersect Paget's binary of "revolutionary" and "reporting." The high disciplinarity mode authorizes work as professionalized culture and exerts influence on the wider theatre community, whether it is focused on forensic content, as in *Seeds*, or cultural presence, as in *Rare*. The low disciplinarity of reduced theatricality retains a tactical power because it can create an image of a rigorous and no-nonsense fidelity to evidence, although it does not resolve the question of the actor and the ethics of representation. But it does have a social value insofar as that image — the representation of a lack of representation — can make it a more useful instrument when used in social justice contexts. In other words, it makes the form accessible, not just in economic terms for groups that cannot afford production costs, but performatively as well.

A useful example is a staged play reading reported by Anam Latif in the winter of 2015 in the *Waterloo Region Record*. A staged reading of a play is a performance that presents as a non-performance; actors often have scripts in hand and there is no attempt to create a mise-en-scène. In this case, the play being read was a verbatim documentary entitled *Rage Against Violence* by Gary Kirkham and Dwight Storring. It was a benefit performance in Cambridge, Ontario, for the Women's Crisis Service of Waterloo Region, held on the stage of the Dunfield Theatre, part of a chain of local houses built and programmed by the commercial theatre producer Drayton Entertainment. The actors were members of the local community affected by the actuality documented in the play, the story of Denise Bourdeau, an abused and murdered Indigenous woman. Along with women who were survivors of abuse, the cast included the Mayor of Cambridge, the Chief of the Waterloo Regional Police Service, and the local Member of the Provincial Parliament. The almost complete absence of theatricality in performances like this has the effect of easing audience response away from aesthetics, to focus on testimony

and post-show discussion. The refusal of disciplinarity functions to authenticate the truth claim, just as elaborate theatricality authenticates the truth claim in *Seeds*. The difference is one of audience and context.

In *Rage Against Violence*, we see the reason that documentary theatre continues to exert a pull at a time when access to mass media has never been easier. The audience is constituted as the commons, and the theatre walls enclosing a delegative public sphere. In the case of *The Laramie Project* or *My Name is Rachel Corrie* we cannot know from the outside the reasons a value-seeking and self-selected audience might buy tickets and attend the play. Is it because they are engaged with the issues represented, or because they are followers of the playwright or the theatre? Are they attracted by the play's currency and controversy? But in an event such as *Rage Against Violence*, performed outside of the theatre economy, the audience is less important than the embodied engagement of spectating and performing social actors who can affect the issue. In the final scene of the play, audience members stand and speak the names of women who have been murdered by their (male) "intimate partners in the Waterloo Region in the past ten years" (84). Performance functions as a channel of communication that brings women survivors, activists, and government onto the same platform, bound by the ethical contract of the documentary script.

With *Rage Against Violence* and countless plays like it, we see the process of theatrical reduction leading to the dismissal of theatricality and the entire apparatus of theatre work. It is a rejection of disciplinarity that suggests that in an age of hyper-mediatization and high-affect theatre spectacles, anti-disciplinarity and theatrical refusal are still as effective as they were four decades ago in an auction barn.

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